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8 December 2013

From Pants to Pearls: Rodger's and Hammerstein's Affect on Post WWII Women

During the 1940s, musicals like *This is the Army* and *Strike up the Band* dominated the theatre world. These musicals contained plots that focused on patriotism and primarily featured leads held by men. In *Strike up the Band*, the two male managers of a cheese factory wage war against Switzerland ("Strike up the band", 2013). In *This is the Army*, a cast filled with men sings about the trials that come with being in the Armed Forces (Kenrick). Theatre producers' primary focus seemed to be on the war raging in Europe and Japan.

While actors were singing about the harsh reality of war, men were actually living it. Many men left home to fight for our freedoms overseas during World War II while women became the power that fueled the American home front. From Rosie the Riveter to articles that talked about different ways to wear your hair at work, the nation was trying to bring glamour to the women who traded their home life for a job in a factory. The Sperry Company even created a Miss Victory pageant where "women were encouraged to wear slacks and keep their hair hidden for safety." These pageants gave working class women a chance to model their work clothes all in hopes to support the company's campaign that "focused on safety practices that eliminated traditional markers of femininity such as long hair and skirts" (Pantnode 231-2450).

However, Europe and Japan fell to the Allied Powers in 1945 and World War II was officially over. The brave American troops who fought the war started returning home. The men who had bravely defeated the Axis Powers dramatically changed the work force. Due to the

increase in male workers, many women became unemployed or had to take jobs that were more suitable for women. Thousands of women who had broken away from the chains of the house had to return to domestic life.

During this time of demotion for these riveters of war, composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein decided to form a partnership. They both want to create the next big thing and as John Nolan stated, “something unmistakably American.” Hammerstein was done with “his share of shoddy shows which were no more than nitwitted plots upon which to hang a random collection of songs and novelty numbers” (Nolan 5). In order to break away from the traditional plot of musicals, they had to create something that was new and exciting. Both Rodgers and Hammerstein agreed that “the only risky things to do in theatre was not to take risks”. With this in mind, Rodgers and Hammerstein create a musical story line with a heroic main character that always falls in love with the girl-next-door (Nolan 4-7).

Rodgers and Hammerstein wanted to create songs that would be “feminine, young, nervous, and, if possible, pretty like a girl” (Wolf). With “girly” lyrics and sweet melodies, Rodgers and Hammerstein added a young and naïve female lead with a doe-eyed view on the world complete with a singing range which would take someone years to master. “To recognize her, one only had to look for the female singer of a waltz” and one would find Rodgers and Hammerstein’s leading lady (Goldstein 1). Their female characters stood by their husbands at all times and were content with being the dainty little homemaker. This was very different from the women warriors of war. Instead of having a bandana and slacks, these leading roles had long hair and flowing dresses. Rodgers and Hammerstein had created a new idea of women in their musicals and helped shape the women of post-World War II society.

The first of Rodger and Hammerstein's love-stricken leads were Laurey Williams and Curly McLain in *Oklahoma*. Set in the territory of Oklahoma, this musical features a "rural cowboy who knows the waltz and its prescribed codes of ballroom behavior" who the audience meets at the start of the show (Cook 40). Curly, a cowhand who has just come home from a drive, is first seen by the audience singing "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning" to describe how happy he is to be back home again. After singing his big musical number, Curly goes straight to Laurey's house to ask her to a local evening play-party. Laurey Williams, who could not be more than twenty, lived on a farm with her Aunt Eller and their hired hand Jud. After another musical number featuring Curly, Laurey rejects Curly's offer and decides to go to the local dance with Jud. Laurey seemed to be punishing Curly for coming back home. The audience then "waits for 37 pages of dialogue and 3 more musical numbers, including those of the secondary leads, before getting a solo that might help us understand [Laurey's] place in this Oklahoma morning and her reluctance towards our waltzing cowboy" (Cook 40).

After seeing Curly with another girl, Laurey finally gets her solo entitled "Many a New Day." She sings this song while getting ready for the dance with some local girls from town. Unlike our rough cowboy, Laurey's solo focuses on "being a female and being or not being, for a time, in a heterosexual relationship" (Cook 40). Laurey expresses her stubbornness and hurt feelings towards Curly with lyrics like "Many a new face will please my eye/ Many a new love will find me" ("Many a New Day", 2013). She, like many women who lost their jobs after the men came home from war, is trying to find her new place in this American dream.

The two leading lovers then find themselves singing a song named "People Will Say We're In Love". In this song, both characters admit that they are in love with each other but are not quite ready to tell the other just yet. She has finally warmed up to the idea that her hero loves

her and has come home to stay. However, there is one problem: Laurey promised Jud she would go to the party with him. Being a good girl of her word, Laurey goes to the party with the burly and overworked Jud. At the party, Jud “makes physical demands on her” and ends with Laurey firing him (Cook 36). Then, she runs crying to Curly. Laurey realizes she has fired the man that runs her Aunt’s farm and that she will not be able to support herself anymore. Curly, who is trying to comfort her, says that he will stay and take care of the farm. He then asks Laurey for her hand in marriage. She says yes and brings back “a stable masculine presence to her inappropriately feminized farm” (Cook 36). These two leads finally publicly admit that they love each other (*Oklahoma!*).

The first musical created by Rodgers and Hammerstein was not only a huge success on stage, it also hit home to many different people across post-World War II America. At “a period when many women who worked outside the home during war [returning] to homemaking,” Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals related to the problems women faced at this time (Wolf). Many women were at first stand-offish toward the men coming home from WWII, as Laurey was towards Curly when he came home from the cattle drive. The factory system of America had a firm grip on women during this time like Jud had on Laurey with the invitation to the dance. However, like Laurey, many women felt like they could take care of themselves and did not need a provider like the strong-willed cowboy Curly. Then again, “women were laid off or took up lower paying female jobs” which caused them to experience the same fears Laurey did when she fired Jud (Seiken). These women could not provide for themselves. So, like Laurey, marriage was the only option.

In spite of this forceful idea of marriage, “women seem to fall hopelessly in love” with this musical (Wolf). *Oklahoma!* was a raging hit. Burns Mantle, a reporter from *The Daily News*

at the time, “called *Oklahoma!* the most thoroughly attractive American musical” in a long time (Nolan 9). Women were dying to become the leading lady in their own love story. They wanted to ride off into the sunset with their American hero and take the job of becoming a wife and mother. Due to the young age of Laurey, many women started to feel a “tremendous societal pressure to focus their aspirations on a wedding ring” (Seiken).

Rodgers and Hammerstein went on to produce many more shows including *Cinderella*, *The King and I*, *State Fair*, and *South Pacific* (Rodgers & Hammerstein: Shows, 2013). Like *Oklahoma!*, these musicals always featured a refined female lead that “invariably marries by the end” (Wolf). These musicals had the same success as the first musical Rodgers and Hammerstein produced.

The characteristics of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s leading characters paved the way for the ideals of a 1950s housewife. Women wanted to be dainty and graceful like the Rodgers and Hammerstein dancers, complete with dreams of having flawless skin, perfect hair, and many beautiful dresses. “Getting married right out of high school or while in college” was starting to become the social norm (Seiken). These social pressures ranged through the 1950s. Women were happy with being the housewife and having a husband to bring home the bacon. These feelings continued in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Sound of Music*.

At the start of the *Sound of Music*, Maria is outside as she confesses how much she regrets leaving the mountains she called home. Maria is a postulant who has vowed to start the path of becoming a nun. However, she is failing horribly. When she returns later than expected, the convent considers what to do with her in a song titled “How Do You Solve a Problem like Maria.” The real problem with Maria is that she has gone down the wrong path in life and “is not destined to be a nun but a wife and a mother” (Wolf). Maria finally shows up towards the end of

the song and Mother Abbess informs Maria that she has to leave the Abbey to become a governess for the von Trapp family. The Captain leaves to attend business and Maria starts to take over the house. She teaches the children how to sing and gives them proper play clothes. When the Captain returns, he is outraged by the children's new behavior until he hears them sing. Maria has brought music back into his home. After a complicated love triangle, Captain von Trapp and Maria fall in love. They are soon married and Maria becomes the new Mrs. von Trapp. (*Sound of Music*). "Maria's 'girlishness' removes her from the convent so she can" fall in love with the Captain and take her proper role of being a wife (Cook 41).

Rodgers and Hammerstein changed the way females were portrayed in musicals. This portrayal affected the lives of women outside of those musicals in such ways that were almost detrimental to the independent and self-sustaining lifestyles of women during World War II. Though women took on the domestic life, Rodgers and Hammerstein made being a wife a great privilege and helped push women into a career of motherhood.

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